

Episode 60: Ready To Die

[Hey guys. Welcome to the season 5 finale. I hope that you enjoyed this whirlwind of a cowboy drama of a season and are pumped to see it off. Next week will be an intermission episode. I am able to produce these episodes at the rate that I do thanks to support from Patreon. That's patreon.com/woe_begone. There you can find early access to episodes, instrumentals, soundtrack albums, Q&As, director's commentaries, and more. That's patreon.com/woe_begone. Special thanks to my 10 newest patrons: Collective Solipsism, Dillon, Hunya Usmani, Ash Cinder, Escherichia, bloodmulch, tiredDrecc, Tiffany Chand, Joe Baker, and Pablo Neurotic for supporting the show. And now, without further ado, episode 60. Enjoy.]

[Warning: This episode contains violence, as well as a loud noise, the timestamp for which will be in the description. Listener discretion is advised.]

[Opening theme plays.]

Michael: [Groans, speaking gruffly.] Ugh! Wake up fuckass.

[Michael throws the taxidermied boar's head at a sleeping Mike.]

Mike: Ugh. What? [He gives a startled shout upon realizing what it is.] Ugh! Michael! What the fuck?

Michael: It's three in the afternoon Mike. Are you planning on experiencing this day at all?

Mike: Not if I don't have to.

Michael: That's no way to treat your brother on his last day on Earth.

Mike: Michael, you're not my brother and far as I can tell, this isn't your last day on Earth. And you just threw a stuffed boar's head on top of me while I was sleeping. I don't owe you shit. That hurt. [He pushed the boar's head to the floor.]

Michael: Hey, careful with that. It was expensive to get him stuffed.

Mike: Then you shouldn't have thrown it at me when I was asleep. It's only been a few days. How did you get it back from the taxidermist already?

Michael: It took a few months, actually.

Mike: Michael, you didn't.

Michael: I'm glad I did, partner. I learned some interesting facts about our future while I was there. It appears that we have abandoned this domicile in the intervening months, I'm afraid.

Mike: Meaning?

Michael: We don't live here anymore.

Mike: You think we moved?

Michael: I think we're dead.

Mike: That seems like catastrophizing to me.

Michael: I wouldn't necessarily jump to that conclusion myself except I have a plan that is going to get us both killed, so the timing adds up.

Mike: Oh. Then I vote that we simply don't do the plan.

Michael: But what if we decide not to do the plan and that's what kills us? Ty's hot on our trail and it's a matter of time before he or his goons show up and take us dead or alive. It's him or us.

Mike: Do you have a better plan than showing up to the compound and getting shot into Swiss cheese this time?

Michael: I do. It's been a busy few months this morning.

Mike: Excuse me?

Michael: As per usual, I have got a lot done while you were sleeping. You might wanna work on that. Work ethic is healthy. Puts hair on your chest.

Mike: So you were presumably fully clothed for whatever absurd mission you're about to tell me about. Which means that you actually came home, took your cowboy hat off, then took your shirt off and put the cowboy hat back on.

Michael: Yup. I would say that I got dressed quite a few times, since it has been 65 days since we last spoke.

Mike: 65 days? What are you talking about?

Michael: Well, approximately 1,500 hours, really. "Days" implies a continuous flow, when it's really a lot more back-and-forth than that. Sunup was 1,500 hours ago for me, pilgrim.

Mike: You did all of that traveling? That's so dangerous, Michael. You didn't tell me where you were going. If something had happened, there would be no way for me to find you. I hid the Calculator from you for a reason.

Michael: You hid it in the top of your closet. I'm not a 9 year old trying to find the secret Christmas presents, Mike. I'm a goddamn cowboy. Nothing gets by me. And you're welcome, by the way. I figured out how to get to Ty Betteridge.

Mike: I kept it in a locked safe. You stole the key. You didn't go to the Flinchite Compound, did you?

Michael: I did, for a couple of weeks at least. That place is locked down. O.V.E.R. could learn a thing or two from them. There's no sneaking in. There's no letting visitors into Tier 1. You can't get in unless you are supposed to be there. It was a waste of time. I had to abandon ship.

Mike: Then what did you do for the other 6 weeks?

Michael: Kasimieras Berzina.

Mike: The guy we killed with Mikey?

Michael: Do you know anyone else named Kasimieras Berzina?

Mike: There's a Kas that lives in the apartment on the other side of the hall.

Michael: That's short for Kaspar, I think. You know who I'm talking about. I drew down on him and then backtracked to figure out where he lives.

Mike: Oh, *that* Kasimieras Berzina! I remember now.

Michael: Your mocking additions are only drawing my story out further, you know. I camped out in front of his apartment building for awhile. I didn't know what I was looking for. I just started a month before we killed him and watched the place. He was a creature of habit. Left at the same time every morning, came home at the same time every evening, didn't go out very much. No kids, no spouse. I bugged the place at one point. Nothing. He might as well have been staring at a blank wall from the time he got home to the time he went to bed. It's a case of highly disciplined information security. The Flinchite Compound does not exist within the walls of Kasimieras's apartment.

Mike: So his house was a bust, too?

Michael: I didn't say that. I did waste a month of my life looking at nothing, but finally Ol' Familiar poked his head out. I've become a student of the dates and times that events occurred regarding Mikey's 4th challenge and the role we played in it, having sacrificed months of my time and aging even further into rugged handsomeness in the process. So, I know, for instance, exactly when we pulled the car over and shuffled Mr. Berzina off of this mortal coil. That time coincides exactly with the arrival of one Mr. Ty Betteridge at Mr. Berzina's apartment complex. I am a firm believer in coincidences and that is absolutely not one of them.

Mike: What was he doing there?

Michael: Taking a good look around. I think he was trying to ensure that his little assassin lackey didn't leave a paper trail. Luckily for him, there wasn't any cleaning up to be done. Luckily for me, I'm nearly positive that he didn't spot, since we would have witnessed the fallout from that already. He did leave the badge behind, though.

Mike: The RFID badge? Why would he leave a Flinchite badge behind in his house?

Michael: To trick me into taking it.

Mike: You're saying that it's fake?

Michael: Yup.

Mike: So if you had found the Flinchite Compound and tried to use it to get inside the gate it would have been—

Michael: Curtains. Yep.

Mike: Phew. Then we're damn lucky that we didn't try that.

Michael: [Reluctant.] I... might have tried that. I'm missing a big chunk of time and not just the time that we're missing together. I traveled without my consent and when I woke up the badge was gone.

Mike: Well, then at least someone has our backs and issued a correction. It wasn't me. This was the first time that I'm hearing about this. I didn't suspect a thing.

Michael: I don't know when you would have been both awake and sober enough to suspect anything.

Mike: That's a low blow.

Michael: Anyway, get your finest hostage taking attire on, pilgrim. Today we are saving the life of one Mr. Berzina, to be used for our own personal ends.

Mike: Wait, I missed a step. We're saving Berzina? Why would we ever want to do that?

Michael: Because it's not like I can just kidnap Ty. He wouldn't talk. I could kill him. That could be fun. But it's not like that will get me any closer to answers. Berzina is an asset. We can dangle him in front of Ty in exchange for information. He can have his assassin back, but in exchange we learn what's really going on here.

Mike: And if he doesn't care about Berzina?

Michael: We just correct ourselves, abort mission. Everything goes back to how it is now. Do you think it's gonna work?

Mike: I don't know, man. I can't point to any part of it and say that it's definitely not going to work. But Base has a no hostage policy. They would flip if they knew that you were preventing the death of someone who threatened us in order to take him hostage for the hope of some information. Ever since we—

Michael: Fuck Base. How are you not getting that? I do not care what they have instructed us to do.

Mike: Don't get me wrong. I see your point. I just see their point, too. The hostage stuff has a way of not working out.

Michael: It'll be fine. Or we'll die. I think it's about 50/50. But this is our chance. What do we have to lose? A lifetime of this? C'mon partner. Saddle up. Let's bag us an assassin, alright?

Mike: [Sighs.] Yeah. Let's do it.

Michael: [Enthusiastically] Are you ready to die?

Mike: [Firmly] No.

Michael: Then we're not going to die. Let's get ready.

[SCENE TRANSITION]

I don't understand how, for all of my protective blubber, I am still pathetically ill-equipped from the cold. It was a frigid night, spitting sleet, on the night that Project 2BDO was ready 2BGo. I made this pun right as Base was sending me and Hunter out into the field. The last thing that I saw in my own time period before being whisked away to the mission time was Anne rolling her eyes as hard as I have ever seen someone roll their eyes. The change in temperature between the warm and welcoming room at Base and the apocalyptically cold stake-out at O.V.E.R. made the effects of time travel worse than usual. I had an eye twitch hours after everything else had settled down and Hunter and I were finding our groove.

Marissa loaned us the key to the spare cart and we were sitting in front of what would eventually be my cabin, just as Marissa and Ravi had done. Hunter had a thermos full of soup and a thermos full of coffee and I have a thermos full of absolutely fucking nothing because it had never occurred to me to bring hot food and drink with me. As a result, Hunter's disposition was brighter than mine, while I shivered beside him.

"You can tough it out, bud," Hunter reassured me as I activated my hand warmers and returned my hands to my coat. He was looking absentmindedly through the night vision scope that Marissa had secured for us, waiting to see if the man we were looking for would show himself. "When I was a kid, my dad took me ice fishing every year. You get used to the cold quick if there's no other options. I thoutcha you were from one of those artic countries for some reason? Like the ones that have a winter where the sun never comes out? Or at least your family was."

"What makes you say that?" I sputtered out in-between teeth chatters.

"Oh, I don't know. Edgar said something about you speaking Swedish or something," Hunter said. "You're not a foreign spy infiltrating an American governmental facility are you?" He laughed.

"No, nothing like that," I said. "And I clearly did not inherit any resilience to cold." I could hear the sleet spitting onto the roof of the cart.

"Well, the first problem is your ears are out," he said. "Here." He reached into his bag, pulled out a knit cap, and put it on my head. "I'd be shivering too if I didn't have a toque on. You gotta prepare yourself. We can't have you out here too cold to do the job."

"Oh, thanks bud," I smiled at him.

"Is that what you think I sound like?" He asked, raising his voice slightly.

"Just a little bit, doncha know?" I teased.

"This is all rich coming from the future cowboy," he replied.

I sighed a happy sigh. The... toque... hadn't warmed me up all the way, but it did make an appreciable difference. My teeth chattering was subsiding. I looked at Hunter, really tried to consider him. My eye lingered on the scar. The scar he got from 357A. An event so cataclysmic that we were still all living in the wake of it.

"What happened to us, Hunter? What happened to the Mike and Hunter combo from when I first moved out here?" I asked.

Hunter stared straight ahead. I could see his breath in front of him as he sat in thought. "Do you want to know the to answer to that, Mike? Do you really want to know or are you just making small talk? Because the answer's different depending on what you want."

"I sort of wanted both, I think," I said.

"What happened is you, Mike. You happened. The bear, the scar, that night that you called from Tier 2, having to rescue everyone when you got back from the Flinchite compound, everything. You have a reputation, you know. All of talk to each other about you, the Hunters I mean. We know things that I've never talked to you about. Some really upsetting crap, Mike. Holy hell. And I pretend that I don't about it because it greases the wheels. But I'm not stupid. Op! There's our guy. Do you see him? Out that way on the path." He pointed in my direction, past me, into the darkness. I squinted but I couldn't see.

"No, but I also don't have night vision," I said.

"Oh, it's him, alright," Hunter said, confidently. "I recognize him. I think that's definitely the guy who I saw that morning."

"So, what do we do now?" I asked.

"We do our jobs, Mike," Hunter replied. "Routine security check. He's out late, we're working the path, nothing strange to pull him aside and ask him who he is and what he's doing."

"Sounds like a better plan than most of mine," I said.

"We can pump him for everything," Hunter said. "His name, make him prove he works here, where he lives, where he's going. We can even accompany him so that we know he's not lying."

"Do you normally do all that on patrol?" I asked.

"Oh heck no. I smile and wave. But that fella don't know that. For all he knows I could be like Marissa," he said.

"Right, so let's do it," I said. And with that, he punched the gas and we sped off to confront the man who was killed by Ty Betteridge.

"We'll take it easy. No need to spook him off," Hunter said. "I'll take care of the talking. You stay back in the cart, since technically you don't work here yet and I don't want him getting wise to our operation. I'll ask him all the boilerplate questions and we can regroup. Maybe transport back to the hotel and warm up for a minute.

"Sounds good to me, especially that last part," I said.

We caught up to the man on the path. Hunter waved him down and got him in the cart's headlights. He got out of the vehicle and approached him. I secretly readied my gun, more prepared for a fight than I think Hunter was.

"How's it going bud?" Hunter called out across the path. I couldn't hear their conversation from the cart. I could see the heat rising off of them as they spoke. They were facing away from me. I couldn't get a good look at him. First the man pointed out a building and then Hunter pointed out the same way. Then he and Hunter shook hands and Hunter returned to the cart. He had a satisfied look on his face.

"How'd it go?" I asked.

"Well, one heck of a name. Says he's called Casimir Burzeena or something like that? Showed me his ID, but I couldn't memorize it. Says he lives over in 90A which was confirmed by his ID and that he was going to that building right there." Hunter pointed at the building that he had pointed to during the conversation. "And it looks like he's about to badge in now, so it looks like he's telling the truth. But that's not all. Look." Hunter pulled out his phone and pulled up a photo. It was a bit dark and a bit blurry, but it was a photo of our culprit. White, medium height, medium build, short brown hair, brown eyes, just as medium as it gets. "Do you recognize him, by any chance?"

"No, I don't think so?" I said. I squinted at the photo but any recognition I felt, I dismissed as coincidence. I was too cold to focus properly.

"Do you know who might?" he asked.

"Charlie." We both said it in unison.

"Of course Charlie would know," I said. "But it's late. Troy's at the gate."

Hunter put the Base earpiece in his ear. We had been maintaining radio silence until we had something to report. I followed suit. TBDO 1 ended with the field participants being separated and if Hunter and I got separated, we wanted to make sure we could both communicate with Base.

"Hey, Marissa?" Hunter said. "Do you copy?"

"Copy," she said, sounding bored. "Did you find something?"

"Sure did," Hunter said. "Is Edgar still up? I think we need someone to run an errand in the present day."

"I think so? What do you need?" she asked. I could hear her call out for him off-mic.

"I just sent him an email with a picture in it. I need Charlie's second opinion on it," he said.

"I'm here," Edgar said. "What's the picture? Oh... I know what picture because you sent it to me from that time. I remember getting it. I thought it might be a virus or sent to the wrong person, so I never opened it back then."

"It's a picture of our guy," Hunter said. "Can you take it to her and ask what she knows? Take an earpiece and keep us in the loop?"

"I don't see why not," Edgar said. "You're right that it should be in person. We don't know Charlie's device security. But yeah, I can take you guys along for the ride."

"And can we maybe get sent back to the hotel in the meantime?" I asked. "I'm freezing."

"He really is. I'm scared his gonna stiffen up into an icicle if we don't break soon," Hunter said.

"Yeah, that's fine. Make your way back to the rendezvous point. In the meantime, I will get ready for contact with Charlie," Edgar said.

"Sounds like we are good 2BDGo," I said. The line went dead.

"So, contact me after you reach the rendezvous point and we will get going from there," Edgar said.

After the break: Charlie.

[Permanence plays as scene transition.]

Mike: Does this feel... familiar to you?

Michael: Yes, Mike, it does feel familiar. If you've forgotten, that's actually us 2 cars in front of us, in front of Berzina. That's the whole point of coming here.

Mike: No, it feels like something else. But I don't remember.

Michael: Eyes on the prize, Mikey bear. Do you remember what happened to us the first time we did this?

Mike: Yeah, you shot him as fast as you could manage.

Michael: Before that. Do you know what's about to happen?

Mike: We're about to start taking backroads?

Michael: Close enough. I know exactly where we're going, and as soon as it's just us and him... and us again, I'm going to make my move. Remember to hold on tight. These dirt and gravel roads can be quite turbulent.

Mike: I remember you saying that.

Michael: You would do well not to forget any of my sage advice, greenhorn.

Mike: Yep. Yep. I remember this exit. We drove him way out into the middle of nowhere, didn't we?

Michael: Pretty far off the beaten path. Hopefully they'll have the good sense to keep going and get Mikey to CANNONBALL while we fix this situation up.

Mike: What's the plan? Run him off the road?

Michael: Just a gentle nudge. We'll have to exchange insurance information after that, of course. Are you ready?

Mike: Wait, what happens if our car gets too damaged to drive away? [Sound of cars making contact.] Holy shit, Mike. Holy shit.

Michael: You leave the plans to me, Mike. [Rumbling.]

Mike: Well, we're both in the dirt now.

Michael: Quick. Get out. Point your gun at him. Tell him to stay on the ground and not speak. I've got the rest.

Mike: Gun? Michael, I didn't bring my gun. I thought we weren't killing anyone. I thought that was the point—

[Sound of a thud as Michael throws his gun into Mike's lap.]

Michael: Take mine. Dipshit. I've got the rest.

[Doors opening and closing.]

Mike: GET ON THE GROUND. NOW. DON'T SPEAK. DON'T MOVE. DON'T TRY ANYTHING FUNNY. ON YOUR KNEES. NOW. HANDS BEHIND YOUR HEAD. GOOD. DON'T MOVE UNLESS I TELL YOU TO.

[Michael gags Casimieras and we hear his muffled yelling.]

Michael: You'll have to be patient with me, Berzina. It's been a little while since I've hogtied a person. You gotta let me know if I pull something out of socket, okay?

Mike: We don't want to hurt you. We just need you for something.

Michael: Yeah, I'm sure he's really convinced by that. Here, help me get him to the car. I don't think we're stuck.

[Car doors opening and closing, thuds, grunts, moans.]

Michael: You know, you're a lot easier to toss into a car dead. Mike, take his phone.

Mike: Like, out of his pocket?

Michael: Mike, I know you are a scared little puppy dog in an unforgiving world, but I need you to do this for me. Just take his phone. Honestly, it's only weird if you make it weird.

Mike: Ummm... I'm sorry. Michael, what is this for?

Michael: What do you mean? This is the whole plan.

Mike: What plan? Okay, I've got the phone. Now what?

Michael: Call Ty and give me the phone. Don't put it on speaker. Whatever he says is between me and him and not his lackey in the backseat.

Mike: Uhh... Okay. Found it. Okay... it's ringing. Here. Take it.

[We hear a faint phone ring.]

Michael: Ty! Ty Betteridge. Great to hear your voice after all these years. Though I don't suppose it's been years for you, only for me. I'm here with your pal Casimieras Berzina. He is quite tied up at the moment and I was hoping that I could exchange his life for

some information. Uh huh. I'm a cowboy now, but I'm more interested in talking about the compound, about O.V.E.R., and about WOE.BEGONE. Or, if you want, I could terminate this member of your... dunno what you guys call it, we call it a corrections team. A little too euphemistic for my blood. Yeah, that's about right. No, I would like some information before I show up to his house with him. I would like to be able to propagate that information as well as my whereabouts in case that you do something untrustworthy. So, let's start. What is your relationship to WOE.BEGONE? [Pause.] Interesting, interesting. So... Ryan... is... presumably... [Pause] Uh huh. And if he's alive, where is he? [Pause] Fair. And if you knew all of that, what the fuck were you having me do in the compound all of that time? [Pause.] No, I think that's fair. Half now, half later and all that. We should meet at Berzina's apartment? I know you're already there. Yeah, that works for me. I'm glad we could come to an agreement and I hope that you can hold up your end in good faith. [Pause.] Uh huh. Uh huh. See you then. Bye.

[Silence in the car.]

Michael: It's qui et in here. Should I turn the radio on?

Mike: Michael, what did he say?

Michael: [whispering] Ty bought Ryan out fair and square. He was running the game he was having us play in the Flinchite compound. He said the compound didn't know but that using us was important to his plans regarding his new ownership and CANNONBALL. Ryan's still alive as far as he knows but doesn't know where he is. He said he'll talk more once Berzinas is safe.

Mike: And it sounded like the truth?

Michael: It didn't even sound like information he minded parting with.

Mike: I guess we will see when we get there how cooperative he is really planning on being.

Michael: Casimieras, my friend, your life has been spared by the honorable Ty Betteridge. Don't worry, you will have the opportunity to grovel at his feet in appreciation.

[Berzinas makes a worried noise.]

Mike: What can I say Michael, except to say that it looks like it's working. Congratulations. Even with the information that we got from the phone call, I'd call even that a success.

Michael: We could just pop open the door, push him out, and go back home, if you're ready to call it a success.

Mike: Nah. I mean, it's tempting to cash out while we're ahead, but no. There's still more to tell us. We need to know what Ty was doing at O.V.E.R., why he was in Tier 2 that night, and why we saw him kill a man in cold blood.

[Scene transition.]

"So I just talk into it?" Charlie's voice was loud and crushed flat by the earpiece. It was a rudimentary technology that was originally designed with 2 different earpieces in mind. Tonight, all 5 earpieces were being used at once: Edgar and Charlie at Charlie's cabin, Marissa at Base, and Hunter and I in a hotel right outside of O.V.E.R.

"Can we get someone to fix the bad signal?" I asked.

"Anne's the only one who has any idea how to do that and she's off doing her own thing tonight and won't be back until tomorrow for her shift," Edgar explained.

"Oh, so Marissa is all alone there?" I asked.

"Yep. I finally got some time away from all of you fuckwits," Marissa replied.

"Were you able to get warm, Bear?" Edgar asked me.

"Yep. I'm all cozy in the hotel with some hot cocoa. It's gonna be difficult to convince myself to go back out there," I said.

"Hi Marissa! Hi Mikey! Hi Hunter!" Charlie was bright and chipper for someone who had been woken up in the middle of the night by her coworkers. It wasn't surprising that she was like this, but it did feel like an unachievable way for someone to be.

"Hi Charlie. Did Edgar show you the picture?" Hunter asked.

"Yeah," Charlie said. "Of course I remember this guy. I know that I say that I always remember a face, but that's an understatement here. You all know that this guy died right?"

"We sure do," I replied. "In fact, that's one of the only things that we know about him. I wasn't working at O.V.E.R. yet and the rest of the gang don't remember him, so we were wondering if you could tell us what you know."

"Casimieras Burzina, I believe," she said. "Not a name I will soon forget. He lived over the east side of the residences but he died near the west side of the residences. That's right, isn't it Hunter? Hunter is the first one who told me about his passing."

"That sounds right to me," Hunter said.

"He was a strange man," Charlie continued. "Well, you're all strange. Sometimes I feel like I'm the only normal person in the whole valley. No offense. But he was different, just like the rest of you. He left O.V.E.R. a lot. Like enough times that he probably spent more time away from work than he did at work. He did intra-complex mail, I think, getting stuff from Tier 1 and sending it further into Tier 2. He seemed extremely on edge leading up to when he died. I saw him several times because he was always leaving and entering at the gate. I told him that if he ever needed a strong woman to come to his rescue from whatever was hounding him, just say the word. I say that to everyone. I'm sure I've said to all of you dozens of times. But he looked me in the eye and said "you can't help me," just like that. He looked like he was already dead. I never learned what happened and I kept my head down about it, but I did see it coming. I just didn't know what exactly was coming."

"I'm sorry Charlie. That sounds like it was really hard to live with," Edgar said. "Do you know if he was friends with a man named Ty Betteridge?"

"If by "friends" you mean "scared shitless," then yeah," Charlie said. "Ty would leave O.V.E.R. right behind him about half of the time. Some of you knew Ty, I think. You know he was very cordial, very professional, very adult despite being younger than most of us. But I saw him when he left from the gate, when he thought that nobody was looking at him anymore. I saw him shift when he was going after Casimieras. It was like he was hunting his prey. Casimieras was always looking over his shoulder for Ty. Are you suggesting that Ty killed him?"

"I don't think we can disclose what we think," Edgar said.

"That means yes," Charlie said. "I'm kind, not stupid, thank you."

"Sorry," Edgar said.

"And then Ty went missing, too. They both fell into the same trap, if you ask me," Charlie said. "They started meddling instead of keeping their heads down. There's a lot to look at at O.V.E.R. Once you get past me, there's a lot of stuff that isn't covered up. If you go around looking for things you have been told not to look for, you're going to get picked off by somebody: either O.V.E.R. for digging too far into things that aren't your business or by the other people who are meddling right alongside you. Who's to say which happened to these two unfortunately souls?"

"That's what we're trying to find out," Marissa said.

"You guys are the same way," Charlie said. "You're not keeping your heads down. I can't help but notice. Chance and Shadow say you've basically closed yourself off into a group. I know what that means. I don't know what's happening but I know how it ends up. Ty Betteridge didn't have a funeral. I couldn't go mourn him, even if I wanted to. Don't end up like him. For my sake."

"We won't. I promise," I said.

"It's not something you can promise," Charlie said. It was the most dour I had ever heard her.

"Well, thanks for telling us what you know, Charlie," Hunter said. "You don't know how valuable it is. Some of that was stuff we've been looking for for months and you just had it in your head. If only we had known the right questions."

"Yeah yeah," Marissa said. "Can we stop the feelings festival and get on with our night? Don't get me wrong, Charlie, I'm grateful, but my shift has like a thousand more hours left in it."

"Yeah, we'll disconnect these so that the audio quality improves," Edgar said.

"Hunter and Mikey, are you cool hanging out for right now? Like, can I leave you alone? I'm craving Combos right now for some reason," Marissa said.

"Combos? Those aren't even food, Marissa," I replied.

"I know, but I just want to chew on some hard pretzels with sandy salt product inside of them," she said.

"There's hamster food in the cupboard," I said.

"Very funny. I'm gonna run to a gas station real quick," she said. "Is that okay? Combos and Mountain Dews for everyone when they get back?"

"Fuck it, I'm down," I said.

"Hmmm... As long as you're fast," Edgar said. "I don't want a lot of downtime."

"Sure thing, boss," Marissa said.

"Alright, we're good to disconnect, then?" I asked.

"Yep," Edgar said.

"Cool. Charlie, thank you so much. You really helped the puzzle come together," I said. "Marissa, we'll talk in a bit once we get back to O.V.E.R. Do we have to calculate? It's fucking Troy at the gate."

"Troy still doesn't know who you are," Charlie said. "There's no need to sneak past him if that's what you're doing."

"We'll do that then," I said.

"That's fine with me, Bear," Edgar said.

"Love you, Panther," I replied.

"You're both disgusting," Marissa interjected.

"Alright, bye everyone!" I said.

Each of us said our various forms of goodbyes and exited the call.

"Well, that was enlightening," I said.

"Leave it to Charlie to know something about everyone," Hunter said.

"So what's the next order of business, once we get back to O.V.E.R.?" I asked.

"I think we check out 90A, his cabin. If he's really going to be away for awhile, then I think we should take a peek inside," Hunter said.

"Agreed. It's a date... bud," I said. "So, I'm going to get real cozy and see what is on cable for a couple hours and we can head back when I'm good and warm and rested."

I spent two comfortable hours sipping hot cocoa and watching It's Always Sunny In Philadelphia on the hotel television.

After the break: we go back into the field.

[I wouldn't want to be powerful pt 2 plays.]

Michael: Hey, Edgar. Just wanted to check in. Me and Mike are in the middle of some work and we're taking a piss break so I thought it would be a good time to call you. Latvia's beautiful. Wish you were here. It's even beautiful when you're in the middle of nowhere taking a leak next to some birch trees. Sometimes it reminds me of when we went up to Glacier, before 357A happened. I'm sorry it's been so long since I've called you, Panther. I've been caught up in my own shit and Mike's struggling a little bit with living out here and I lost track of time. You know how time is, you aren't even in this time with me. It's been a really long time since I've heard from you from my perspective. I'm sorry. I shot a wild boar a couple months back from my perspective and last weekend from Mike's perspective. I've been a real cowboy recently. Hey, when you listen to this can you do me a favor? There's some information that we picked up that I don't wanna lose, so if you could propagate it for me? Long story short, we kidnapped a Flinchite by the name of Casimieras Berzina and leveraged his capture to gain some information. You can be mad at me about that later. We've got him gagged and hogtied in the car right now. Ty says that he bought WOE.BEGONE off of Ryan fair and square, he was running the game while he was holding me hostage, the Flinchites didn't know he was running the game, and that Ryan is still alive. What his plan was with me while I was there I still don't know, but that's something to chew on. He said it was important to his mission as it pertains to CANNONBALL. Oh, I guess I haven't told you about Berzina either. Berzina is the guy that tried to kill us and Mikey when we were doing his 4th challenge. I used a Calculator you didn't know I had to track him back to his house. Then I hitched a ride with him to the Flinchite Compound. I'll text you the coordinates to that. Don't wanna lose that either. I'm sorry that I haven't been keeping you abreast of my activities. But, now you know at least. I'm sorry, Panther. It's been a struggle recently and I'm treading water. And I'm almost positive I'm walking me and Mike into a trap right now. Either we meet with Ty or we don't and I think we die either way. I don't think we make it out of this in one piece. Ty's not the type of guy to take us out in a hail of gunfire, but we don't live. I don't think so. I went to the future to get the boar back from the taxidermist and we aren't around anymore. So I wanted to call to say that I love you and I'm sorry I've been so distant recently and I'm sorry for everything I've ever done. Panther, I love you so much it burns a hole in my chest. I'm sorry for everything. I'll see you on the other side. I love you. Take care of yourself. I won't see you soon but I'll see you when I see you. I love you, Panther. [Pause] Goodbye, Edgar.

[Yelling] Mike! Finish up playing with yourself and get back to the damn car.

Mike: [Approaching from afar] I'm coming, I'm coming. I didn't actually have to go, but it's the last stop so I thought I would give it my best shot. Hey, you okay? You look like you've been crying.

Michael: It's just the flowers out here. They make my eyes puff up. Let's get back on the road.

Mike: If you say so. [Doors open and close.] Hey, Berzina, you still alive back there? Sorry about all of this. You'll be safe and sound and out of our custody in just a few minutes here, okay? I know people only say "it's nothing personal" when they're trying to excuse some evil shit they've done, but it's really nothing personal. We've been sent to kill people, ourselves. We know how it goes. You were fixing something your boss said was broken, in all likelihood. We've been there and honestly it's fucked up how we're used sometimes. Like a tool. But last time we did this we killed you, so this is a step up, right? Sort of? I'm glad you're not dead anymore, for the record. Michael here is the fastest gun in Latvia and he shot you down before we could do any diplomacy, which I understand: there wasn't any guarantee there was diplomacy to be done. But I'm glad we could reduce our body count by one. Michael, anything you want to add?

Michael: I'm sorry.

Mike: Sorry for killing him? I already said it was nothing personal—

Michael: I'm sorry to you, Mike.

Mike: To me?

Michael: I spent too much time trying to get you to take care of yourself and not enough time taking care of you.

Mike: I don't need you to take care of me, Michael. I'm fine. Incredibly hungover, but ultimately fine. And, I'm old enough to take care of myself. You don't have to be strong for me. We can be strong for each other.

Michael: Well, good, because I'm not strong at all.

Mike: I wouldn't say that. You saved Ravi. That was strong. You didn't have to do that. Base was telling you to kill him and you did what was right instead and the world is a

better place for it. That's strength. You didn't solve all of my problems, but that's not your place.

Michael: I made everything worse.

Mike: No, you didn't. I would've died 50 times over if I had been out here alone. If not from assassins like this asshole... sorry... then because I just couldn't handle it out here. I would have fizzled out by now.

Michael: You'd be fine. Can we cut the pep talk? We're almost there. I need to focus.

Mike: ...I don't like how your mood shifted after we took a pee break.

Michael: It was a difficult piss.

Mike: Have you had a prostate exam yet? I know you're older than me and I've started to think about it.

Michael: Shut the fuck up, Mike.

Mike: Okay, okay! Ornering today, are we?

Michael: We're here. I'm sorry, Mike. I love you.

Mike: You love me? Is it even okay to say that? What's going on?

Michael: Hey, Ty? We're here. Are you gonna spill some more beans for us or what?
[Pause] I'm not coming up until I can get a guarantee of safety for both me and Mike.
[Pause] Whatever you think it means. You're the one that needs to come up with something. Prove to me that we are safe. [Pause] Yep, Berzina is right here with us.
[Pause] Hello? Ty? Hello?

Mike: He's not answering?

Michael: We're being set up. Mike, I'm sorry. Run. We need to—

[Time travel sounds.]

[Scene transition]

I was cold again, but this time I was better prepared to handle it. I had Hunter's... toque... and a thermos full of hot cocoa. Maybe too much dairy for one night, but I could deal with that later. We walked right past Troy and into O.V.E.R. with no questions asked. That guy really isn't very good at his job. Charlie would have asked me a dozen questions and then probably threatened me for good measure. We made it back to the rendezvous point at the designated time, but we kept silent on the line. Marissa seemed like she was tired of talking, so we could break radio silence after we got some more info. We didn't need her holding our hands through every step of the process. Hunter and I were grizzled field work professionals. Marissa was just there to write everything down and to extract us in case of an emergency.

We were back in the patrol cart with Hunter at the wheel again. Our first stop was cabin 90A, to see if our culprit was home yet and, if not, to rifle through his things to see if we could figure out more about what was going on. There was a large and obvious link to Ty. Charlie confirmed as much. I had no idea what we'd find in the cabin, though. Flinchite stuff? Arbiter stuff? Tier 3 O.V.E.R. stuff? Or something else, even? Marissa had already given us permission to break in. I think we both disagreed with Anne about not breaking into Ty's cabin when we had the chance. It was a missed opportunity. It definitely seemed like there was something in there worth looking at.

We pulled up to the cabin and Hunter brought the cart to a stop. He turned it off and then just stared at me. It felt like the air had been sucked out from around us. I was suddenly incredibly aware of how cold it was.

"So, should you pick the lock or should I? I'm not very good at it," I said, trying to salvage the mood, or at least figure out why it had changed.

"You really thought you could get away with it?" Hunter asked. I recognized the look on his face from the day before, the meeting about Project TBDO.

"Hunter, you're scaring me. What do you mean?" I asked.

"You thought that you could just kill me in cold blood in the middle of a federal building and nobody would find out? You thought we were that stupid?" He asked.

I sat in a stunned silence. "It-it-it wasn't you," I stammered. "It was Punished Hunter. The other Hunter, I mean. The older one. He backed me into a corner."

"It was me, you dumbfuck," Hunter said.

"No. I get that. I'm not trying to make excuses. I—"

He cut me off. "No. Mike. Mike Walters. Look at me. Really look at me. You killed *me*. You total buffoon. You thought that you could kill me and just traipse off and start your own Base for time travel operation. And you thought that we would be fine with that?"

"You're Punished Hunter," I said.

"And I don't appreciate the nickname," he added. "You know, we took a vote. And we decided by consensus that I should kill you tonight while I have the chance. Just

[boom] one right between the eyes, dump you somewhere that the bears and wolves can get to you, the whole shebang. And start on the rest of the Mikes tomorrow.” Hunter had slowly and discretely removed his gun from its holster and was pressing it gently into my side.

“So, what? This is the end? You just kill me out here and that’s it?” I asked.

“The end for you. Or it would be. I was the one dissenting vote. Killing is really unnecessary and, honestly, inefficient. How many times have you been killed Mike? Like 7 or 8?”

“I think it’s actually way more than that, but I’m the wrong person to ask since I don’t remember any of those times,” I said. “I was thinking more like 20 or 30.”

“So you understand that killing Mike Walters isn’t as clean of a solution as it seems on its face,” he said. “Don’t misunderstand. I have a gun pointed at you because it is a solution, if not a perfect one. No sudden movements or this gets painful for you.”

“Are you gonna shoot me right under the ribs? Because that’s where you’re pointing,” I said. The gun had slowly been pressed harder and harder, right under my ribcage. It was starting to hurt.

“Imagine a gutshot Mike Walters crawling around O.V.E.R.” Hunter said. “No, it’s just insurance. I’m not going to need to use it. You’re actually pretty pliable when faced with extreme circumstances.”

“Okay, I’m pliable, you’re right,” I said. “What do you want?”

“First,” he said, pulling out a heretofore unseen walkie talkie with his free hand. He pressed the button on it. “This is Lion, copy? Over.”

“Awaiting signal, sir, over.” A voice responded.

“This is signal. Winter Storm is nearing completion. Commence demolition of the Walters Base, over,” Hunter said.

“Awaiting second signal, over,” The voice said.

“Second signal is confirmed. Commence demolition of the Walters Base, over,” Hunter said.

“Commencing demolition. Standby for confirmation, over,” the voice said.

“I said I wasn’t going to kill *you* tonight. I didn’t say anything about anyone else,” Hunter said to me. “There are people that are much easier to kill and keep dead than you, Mike. Just wanted to let you see what you’ve done. What it’s all come to. That didn’t have to happen. You didn’t have to start the chain of events that lead to that, but you did and here we are.”

I sat in the cart, utterly dumbstruck, mouth agape, my breath escaping into the cold air in visible, hectic bursts, a look of complete shock on my face. It sure sounded like I had just got everybody killed. I was too stunned to speak, too stunned to react, to do anything except sit there and look at Hunter. My eyes lingered on the scar on his face. The scar that wasn’t there when I met him.

“Now, get the fuck out of my cart,” he said. He raised his foot and kicked my out of the cart, his boot landing roughly where the gun had been pressed to me before. Unable to defend myself, I fell out of the cart and landed on the ground beside it. I could feel the sleet hitting my face.

“Yeah. Right there should do it,” Hunter said. By the time I looked up again, the gun had been replaced with a Calculator. I didn’t know where he had found one. He was entering coordinates.

“This isn’t going to be the last time that I see you,” Hunter said, “But won’t it be so nice to have a break? Maybe you can learn to behave yourself while you’re away.”

“Hunter—“ I squeaked, but it was too late. Before I could say anything, I was gone. I felt the familiar discomfort of travel: the headspinning, disorienting nature of sudden movement through time and space.

When the vertigo stopped and my vision cleared, I looked around. I was in a forest, with tall, skinny trees. There were no roads. I couldn’t see any signs of civilization. I didn’t have a single clue as to where—or when—I was.

[Wilderness plays.]

[End theme plays.]